



Hello Missile Defence – Goodbye Nuclear Sharing?

It appears likely that NATO's new strategic concept, although largely only confirming the status quo on nuclear policy, will also set out the bold decision to adopt a Ballistic Missile Defence System. Through this combination the new strategic concept looks set to herald radical change in long cherished principles about nuclear sharing and to directly address sensitive issues of Alliance cohesion and deterrence posture.

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The strategic concept to be agreed at the Lisbon NATO summit on the 19–20 November 2010 is likely to be conservative as far as nuclear forces are concerned. Although some NATO members have called for a withdrawal of existing Europe-based non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNWs)¹ the expectation is that the document will reaffirm continued maintenance of secure and reliable nuclear forces at a level consistent with the prevailing security environment. Yet, behind the moderate wording, the document to be agreed in Lisbon is far from conservative. It is likely to lead to wide-ranging and fundamental change in the nearly sixty-two year old alliance. Oddly, change in deterrence policy is likely to be bold and sudden whereas change in nuclear policy is likely to be discreet and gradual.

BOLD AND SUDDEN CHANGE – BALLISTIC MISSILE DEFENCE

NATO is likely to agree to adopt a new Ballistic Missile Defence System (BMDS) involving the placement of ballistic missile interceptors in an as yet unspecified number of European NATO countries (and Russia) and which may be operational as soon as 2015. Although some NATO countries, particularly France, remain concerned about the move to a missile defence system it seems likely that not only will NATO members agree to adopt the system but that it may be operated in cooperation with Russia. Russian participation recently became more likely when President Medvedjev accepted the invitation to attend the Lisbon summit. Although there are still issues to be negotiated, especially in relation to the operational character and ownership of the system and precisely how

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. A constructive relationship with Russia through missile defence cooperation must be prioritised as a modern example of functional cooperation to change old patterns of behaviour and beliefs. The model of the European Coal and Steel Community might be considered.
2. As part of its overall reform process NATO should move towards rhetoric and organisational structures that focus on real security needs rather than archaic truisms.
3. The profile of the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) should be raised to increase sharing of nuclear planning at the strategic level in preparation for eventual withdrawal of all or most NSNWs.
4. Forms of burden sharing other than nuclear sharing should be emphasised – notably missile defence sharing and practical burden sharing in NATO's ongoing operations. An appropriate consultative forum for facilitating internal dialogue should be established.

¹ These weapons are commonly referred to as 'Tactical Nuclear Weapons'. However, this name is specific to planned military use during the Cold War. The more precise term 'Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons' is therefore used in this Policy Brief.



the decision to launch an interceptor will be taken, these do not appear insurmountable. The prospect therefore is that NATO will have a Ballistic Missile Defence System in the foreseeable future.

If NATO does manage to take the decision and install the system several of its most pressing security issues will undoubtedly have been addressed. Although missile defence itself raises a number of questions in relation to deterrence posture, a BMDS nevertheless seems more appropriate than the current nuclear posture vis-à-vis the most likely security challenges of the 21st century, challenges such as missile attacks from rogue nuclear states or terrorist organisations. Furthermore, provided Russia is involved in a meaningful and mutually beneficial manner, the decision to install BMDS may finally endow the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) with real purpose as a site for practical missile defence cooperation and thereby possibly contribute to lifting the NATO-Russia relationship to an entirely new level. Finally, such a change is likely to fundamentally revise a number of established, but ultimately outdated and illogical practices related to deterrence by punishment and, not least, act as a means of maintaining Alliance cohesion and risk and burden sharing.

The puzzling question, however, is why NATO seems

unlikely to 'ride the wave of change' and also agree to the withdrawal of the NSNWs that most agree are of little strategic value and which were intended to support a nuclear posture now widely seen as defunct.

NATO'S NUCLEAR LOGIC

The role of nuclear weapons in NATO has consistently been described as political: to deter potential adversaries and to connect (or in NATO jargon 'couple') the defence of the European NATO allies with that of the United States. American NSNWs are placed in European NATO countries to ensure that the United States will be drawn into any nuclear conflict. The deployment of American nuclear weapons in Europe was therefore partly intended to reassure European NATO members of the American nuclear guarantee and the credibility of Article Five of the North Atlantic Treaty, which promises that "an attack on one shall be considered an attack on all". Moreover, the nuclear weapons deployed in European NATO countries were seen as a symbol of NATO cohesion and solidarity through nuclear sharing. To put it bluntly, nuclear sharing meant that all members 'dipped their fingers in the blood' of a possible nuclear confrontation and that they shared risks and benefits as equally as possible through hosting nuclear

THE RETURN OF THE NUCLEAR DEBATE

NATO's nuclear debate has lain dormant since the end of the Cold War. However, in the past 18 months several developments have combined to bring the nuclear issue back into both policy debates and the public awareness:

- Nuclear weapons were firmly placed on the global agenda by President Obama's Prague speech in April 2009 where he raised the prospect of a world free of nuclear weapons. Obama's call for a nuclear-free world has since been echoed on a number of occasions by several prominent policy-makers.
- The issue was placed on NATO's agenda in October 2009 when German foreign minister Guido Westerwelle persuaded Angela Merkel that Germany should seek the withdrawal of American nuclear weapons stationed in Germany as part of a wider NATO effort to pursue nuclear disarmament and arms control. The German foreign ministry has since actively lobbied fellow NATO countries to support a call for a revision of the role of nuclear weapons in NATO strategy and for complete withdrawal of all NSNWs from NATO territory.
- Three crucial agreements in the first half of 2010

have kept the issue high on the global agenda: the new START follow-up treaty capping strategic warheads at 1550 on each side; the nuclear security summit hosted by President Obama and affirming that nuclear terrorism is one of the most challenging threats to international security; and finally the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference reaffirming the commitment to eliminating all nuclear weapons.

- The delivery systems for NATO's NSNWs (F-16 and Tornado aircraft) are due for modernisation or replacement within the next decade necessitating a decision about existing NSNWs. The German choice of the Eurofighter could complicate issues of transfer of technical information on making the aircraft dual-capable.
- At the urging of several member states (Belgium, Norway, the Netherlands, Germany and Luxembourg) Alliance foreign ministers discussed the nuclear issue at a meeting in Tallinn in April 2010. The meeting concluded with a statement that as long as nuclear weapons exist NATO will remain a nuclear alliance.
- The future of the independent nuclear deterrents in Britain and France has been a matter of national debate – especially in Britain in connection with deep cuts in the defence budget.



New | Nouveau Strategic Concept stratégique

weapons and by participating in nuclear planning. Since the 1960s all NATO countries except France have participated in the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG).

Although such reasoning may seem archaic in the present strategic environment, there are nevertheless still NATO allies who insist that the cohesion of NATO is dependent on sharing the nuclear burden. Similarly, many new NATO members feel insecure vis-à-vis Russia and insist on a continued need for nuclear deterrence. In their view NATO is still primarily an Article Five Alliance

meant to protect the territory of its member states. It might be argued therefore that the value of NATO's existing nuclear stance is upheld more for internal reasons of cohesion than for realistic and relevant threat perceptions. Moreover, it follows that if nuclear weapons are a symbol of Alliance cohesion, disagreement about the role of nuclear weapons is equally a sign of lack of cohesion. As all nuclear decisions in NATO's history have inevitably led to crisis and threatened Alliance cohesion it is not surprising that most member states have been reluctant to revisit the nuclear issue, despite the many factors in favour of such a discussion. Westerwelle's suggestion for withdrawal of American nuclear weapons and his invitation to discuss the nuclear issue in preparation for the new strategic concept was therefore not received with enthusiasm by most member states, and looks unlikely to influence the wording of the strategic concept.

NON-STRATEGIC NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN EUROPE

By the early 1960s seven NATO countries hosted American nuclear weapons (Belgium, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Turkey and the United Kingdom). The number of non-strategic nuclear weapons peaked in 1971 at around 7300 after which it gradually declined then fell dramatically after the Cold War. In 1991 the United States unilaterally withdrew all ground-launched, short-range NSNWs worldwide, including 2400 artillery shells, surface-to-surface missiles and anti-submarine bombs in Europe. Approximately half of the original 1400 B-61 free-fall bombs remained in Europe. The US quietly withdrew all approximately 20 deployed warheads from Greece in 2001, followed by around 130 from Germany and 110 from the UK in 2004. Today 150–200 NSNWs are held in Belgium, Germany, Italy, Holland and Turkey.

Source: NATO Parliamentary Assembly; US Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons in Europe: a Fundamental NATO Debate

A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE

One may well ask for how long a non-decision on NSNWs can be maintained. The prospect of BMDS in NATO (and Russia) within a handful of years invites new thinking on burden and risk sharing, and the nature of deterrence. Indeed the report of a group of experts headed by Madeleine Albright in preparation for the drafting of the new strategic concept states that “a NATO missile defence system will enhance deterrence and transatlantic sharing of responsibility, reinforce that security is indivisible and allow for concrete security cooperation with Russia”. Although the report also states that any decision to change NATO's nuclear policy, including the geographic distribution of NATO nuclear deployments, should be made by the Alliance as a whole, the recommendations on nuclear weapons are vague enough to allow for reduction and possible elimination of all NSNWs. It is specified that “under the current security conditions” some forward deployment of



Country	Current Dual-Capable Aircraft	Location	Replacement Aircraft	Scheduled Replacement
Belgium	F-16	Kleine Brogel	F-35?	2020?
Germany	Tornado IDS	Büchel	Eurofighter	2015
Italy	Tornado IDS	Ghedi	F-35	2021–25
Netherlands	F-16	Volkel	F-35	2020?

Source: Malcolm Chalmers and Simon Lunn; *NATO's Tactical Nuclear Dilemma*, RUSI, March 2010.

American nuclear systems must be retained. Yet clearly the adoption of a BMDS and cooperation with Russia will represent a significant change in ‘the current security environment’ and the concept ‘some forward deployment’ is vague to say the least. In other words the combination of the political aim of moving towards Global Zero, which will probably be mentioned in the strategic concept text, the adoption of BMDS and possible practical security cooperation with Russia may represent a unique opportunity for changing NATO’s outdated nuclear posture and deterrence strategy. The only puzzling question therefore is ‘why not now?’

Danes, who knew Anders Fogh Rasmussen as Prime Minister, recognise that ‘chance’ and ‘coincidence’ are not in his vocabulary and it is fairly safe to assume that the process that is currently unfolding is a carefully scripted one. The scenario that seems to be playing out is one of gradual and preferably discreet change on nuclear posture and policy that will take place after the adoption of the new strategic concept and after the placement of the new BMDS but *before* the next strategic concept looms. Given NATO’s consistently bad experience with highly public nuclear decisions it is probable that the ‘script’ of the Secretary General foresees a quiet and discreet withdrawal of the remaining B-16 free-fall bombs as and when the dual capable aircraft to deliver the bombs are withdrawn and as and when ‘current security

conditions’ change. Such a timetable would mean that NATO has the next ten years or so for those who value nuclear sharing and deterrence to adjust to the situation as the number of NSNWs quietly reduces before the next strategic concept needs to be formulated. In this strategy the emphasis is on internal dialogue rather than potentially damaging public nuclear decisions. As NATO has no specified minimum necessary nuclear force level the retention of a symbolic handful of NSNWs would be in line with the anticipated text on nuclear forces in the present strategic concept. This, along with changed relations with Russia and installation of BMDS, will prepare NATO for the following strategic concept. Anders Fogh Rasmussen is known to be a long-term strategic planner and never to tolerate departure from a carefully planned script. The fate of nuclear weapons and NATO’s move from nuclear sharing to missile defence is no exception. The change on the horizon may well signal the beginning of the end of NATO’s over-reliance on NSNWs – despite the conservative sounding document likely to be agreed in November.

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SUGGESTED READINGS

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